

MACBETH – TRAGIC HERO OR JUST MISUNDERSTOOD?



MACBETH: A TRAGIC HERO

- Every Shakespearian tragedy has one
- What makes a hero tragic? Why would we still refer to Macbeth as a hero?
- **How does he still retain our sympathy?**



TRAGIC HERO FORMULA

1. **He must appear to be noble** – Macbeth certainly is. He's good in battle, has served his country well; he even fights with himself whether to kill or not to kill the King

Quotes:

“Brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name”

(Sergeant, 1.2, line 16)

“He's here in double trust:

first, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

both strong against the deed: then, as his host,

who should against his murderer shut the door,

not bear the knife myself” (Macbeth 1st soliloquy, 1.7)

2. He must regret his decline into wickedness –
certainly. It drives him mad! Surely it wouldn't do
this if he were pure evil?

“I'll go no more: I am afraid to think what I have done;
look on't again I dare not”

**“Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou
couldst!”** (2.2 after killing Duncan)

“Full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (3.2)

3. He must speak the best poetry of the play

“But in these cases we still have judgement here: that we but teach blood instructions, which being taught return to plague th’inventor: this even-handed justice commends th’ingredience of our poisoned chalice to our own lips”

(1st sol, 1.7)

“Art thou but a dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?” (2nd sol, 2.1)

“Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (5.5 after LM’s death)

HOW DOES SHAKESPEARE DEVELOP THE CHARACTER OF MACBETH?

- **Act I** – Macbeth is **first described** as ‘**brave Macbeth**’
- Significant that he’s described by someone who doesn’t appear in play again – a bleeding Sergeant – this shows the common perception of MB.
- **First line he speaks** – “**So foul and fair a day I have not seen**” (1.3)
- **foreshadows the evil to come**. Parallels are already able to be drawn between him and the witches. Also links to theme – appearance vs reality.
- His **fatal flaw (ambition) emerges** as soon as he realises the first prophecy has been fulfilled – “**Glamis and thane of Cawdor – the greatest is behind**” (1.3)
- Able to be persuaded by Lady Macbeth but still doubts decision to kill – his first soliloquy shows there is some good in him – he can recognise many reasons why he shouldn’t go through with it

- **Act II – Macduff begins to suspect him**
- **“May you see things well done there: adieu! Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!”** (to Lennox who is going to Scone – Macduff refuses to go; quite an insult really) (2.4)
- **Act III – character deteriorates** - paranoid. Fears Banquo. Keeps secrets from wife.
- 3.4 – pivotal banquet scene his deterioration is revealed – afterward makes a conscious decision to be evil by deciding to visit the Weird Sisters
- **Act IV – evil, evil, evil... arranges murders of the innocent.** No motive except to get at Macduff
- **Act V – remarks that he cannot feel normal human emotions anymore – “I have almost forgot the taste of fear”** (5.5) – is depressed more than anything at his wife’s demise
- Redemption in that he decides to stay at the castle and fight - also in that at first he refuses to kill Macduff

MACBETH'S DECISIONS – ACT BY ACT

- It's interesting to note that **every act is driven by one of Macbeth's decisions**
- **Act I** – his decision to **listen to witches prophecies**
- **Act II** – decision to **kill Duncan**
- **Act III** – decision to **have Banquo killed**
- **Act IV** – decision to **kill Macduff's family**
- **Act V** – decision to **stay and fight** (this redeems him somewhat)

WHAT TECHNIQUES DOES SHAKESPEARE USE TO SHOW HIM TO US?

- Characterisation / use of foils
- Dialogue
- Imagery (robes / evil / sickness)
- Soliloquies and how they stop as evil increases
- Foreshadowing – the witches